Washington's Ideas of Foreign Alliances

Present Situation of the United States Makes First President's Words and Actions Toward Europe of Paramount Value in Guiding National Policy

THE United States of America has for the first time sent her armed forces to fight on the soil of Europe and her navy to scour the seas in company with the fleets of transatlantic allies. In view of this fact and of the approach of the 186th anniversary of Washington's birth there is special interest now in the precepts concerning America's foreign relations laid down by him in his memorable Farewell Address, as well as in public documents and private correspondence.

President Wilson in his "History of the American People," which was written when he was president of Princeton University, describes the conditions which impelled Washington to take the position he did. Our relations with France during Washington's second term were peculiarly delicate, especially in view of the fact that there were still foreign Powers within striking distance of our own territories. In the proclamation of neutrality issued in April, 1793, he first enunciated his policy of keeping aloof from alien entanglements. The document was couched in terms not dissimilar from those which were used in the proclamation signed by Woodrow Wilson in 1914.

Incident of Citizen Genet.

Two of the allies against France were then established upon the very borders of the young American republic, for British troops held posts on the northwestern frontier and Spain controlled that important outlet of our commerce the Mississippi. The German propaganda of to-day was paralleled by the activities of Citizen Genet in 1793.

"The very day," to quote from "A History of the American People," "that the newspapers of Philadelphia printed the significant and imperative proclamation [of neutrality], 'Citizen' Genet reached the city as the accredited Minister of the French Republic to the United States. He had landed from a French frigate at Charleston on the 9th of April, had commissioned privateers and had enlisted men there to prey upon the British commerce before presenting himself for recognition at Philadelphia and had travelled from stage to stage of his pleasant journey northward to meet nothing but enthusiastic welcome everywhere.

Applauded Throughout Country.

"He had confidently expected to command America as his ally against the world. The Governor of South Carolina had approved of his extraordinary acts at Charleston. Genet had commanded that English prizes be brought into the nearest ports of the United States and that French Consuls should condemn them in prize court, and yet he had heard nothing but applause until he reached the presence of Washington."

The first President received him coldly, undid all that he had done and requested his recall, even at a time when the flamboyant Citizen was being feted and toasted in the capital of the new nation.

The wisdom of the course of Washington in preventing at least that foreign alliance was soon manifested, as the news of the atrocities of the French Revolution spread and the duplicity of Tallyrand was revealed. This was only a passing phase, for when permanent government came to France the pristine friendship between the two countries was no longer obscured and the great debt of gratitude which we owed to her was more and more recognized.

Evolved After Much Study.

We have, therefore, to consider in rereading the utterances of Washington in the last decade of the eighteenth century just what causes there were which led to his determined stand against any alliance with the Powers of the Old World. How his conception of what was needed for the critical and formative period in our history was cautiously evolved out of much consideration and study is indicated in a letter which on August 11, 1790, he penned to Lafayette:

"It seems to be our policy," he wrote, "to keep in the situation which nature has placed us, to observe a strict neutrality and to furnish others with those good things of subsistence which they may want and which our fertile land abundantly produces, if circumstances and events will permit us to do so.

"Unentangled in the crooked policies of Europe * * * I have supposed that with the exercise of a just, steady and prudent national policy we shall be the gainers, whether the powers of the Old World may be at peace or war, but more especially in the latter case."

This is what he wrote to David Humphreys in March, 1793, when the air was filled with the rumors of the coalition against France:

"All our late accounts from Europe hold up the expectation of general war in that quarter. For the sake of humanity I hope that such an event will not take place, but if it should I trust that we shall have too just a sense of our interests to originate any cause that may involve us in it. And I ardently wish that we may not be forced into it by the conduct of other nations."

He expressed much the same idea in a letter to the Earl of Buchan in April, 1795.

Washington, after due deliberation and availing himself of the criticisms of Alexander Hamilton, issued his memorable Farewell Address to the Congress of the people in the spring of 1796. Some extracts from the address follow:

"The nation which indulges toward another an habitual hatred or an habitual fondness, is in some degree a slave. It is a slave to its animosity, or to its affection, either of which is sufficient to lead it astray from its duty or its interest.

"The passionate attachment of one nation for another produces a variety of evils. Sympathy for the favorite nation, facilitating the illusion of an imaginary common interest in cases where no real common interest exists, and infusing into one the enmities of the other, betrays the former into a participation of the quarrels and wars of the latter, without adequate inducement or justification.

"Against the insidious wiles of foreign influence, I conjure you to believe me, fellow citizens, the jealousy of a free people ought to be constantly awake; since history and experience show that foreign influence is one of the most baneful foes of republican government. But that jealousy to be useful must be impartial; else it becomes the instrument of the very influence to be avoided, instead of a defence against it. Excessive partiality for one foreign nation and excessive dislike for another cause those whom they actuate to see danger only on one side and serve to veil and even to second the arts of influence on the other.

"The great rule of conduct for us in regard to foreign nations is, in extending our commercial relations to have with them as little political connection as possible.

"Our detached and distant situation invites and enables us to pursue a different course. If we remain one people under an efficient government the period is not far off when we may defy material injury from external annoyance; when we may take such an attitude as to cause the neutrality we may at any time resolve upon to be scrupulously respected; when belligerent nations under the impossibility of making acquisitions upon us, will not lightly hazard the giving us provocation when we may choose peace or war, as our interest guided by our justice shall counsel.

"Why forego the advantages of so peculiar a situation? Why quit our own to stand upon foreign ground? Why, by interweaving our destiny with that of any part of Europe, entangle our peace and prosperity in the toils of European ambition, rivalship, interest, humor or caprice?

"'Tis our true policy to steer clear of permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world; so far I mean as we are now at liberty to do it; for let me not be understood as capable of patronizing infidelity to existing engagements. * * * But in my opinion it is unnecessary and would be unwise to extend them.

"Taking care always to keep ourselves, by suitable establishments, in a respectable defensive posture, we may safely trust to temporary alliances for extraordinary emergencies.

"In relation to the still subsisting war in Europe, my proclamation of April 22, 1793, is the index of my plan. Sanctioned by your approving voice and by that of your representatives in both houses of Congress, the spirit of that measure has continually governed me.

"After deliberate examination with the aid of the best lights I could obtain I was well satisfied that our country, in all the circumstances of the case, had a right to take and was bound in duty and interest to take, a neutral position. Having taken it, I determined in so far as it should depend upon me to maintain it with moderation, perseverance and firmness.

"The duty of holding a neutral conduct may be inferred, without anything more, from the obligation which justice and humanity impose on every nation, in cases in which it is free to act, to maintain inviolate the relations of peace and amity toward other nations.

"The inducements of interest in observing that conduct will be best referred to your own reflections and experience. With me a predominant motive has been to gain time to our country to settle and mature its yet recent institutions, and to progress without interruption to that degree of strength and consistency which is necessary, humanly speaking, to give it the command of its own fortunes."

And yet, despite the sentiments uttered by Washington with such finality, he had hardly left the Presidency for the retirement of Mount Vernon when he was among the first to protest against what he termed "the outrageous conduct of France." Washington again unsheathed his sword and became the commander in chief of the armies of the United States. There was no formal declaration, and the war was in itself insignificant and brief. By 1800 the Consulate had been set up and terms were made with Napoleon Bonaparte which were satisfactory to both nations.

Lafayette's Visit Valuable.

The visit of Lafayette many years later practically removed the last vestige of the misunderstanding which interfered for a time with the friendly relations between the peoples of the United States and France.

The pressure meanwhile upon the Federalists had greatly unsettled them and broken their self-restraint.

"They had been intrusted," to quote again from President Wilson's history "with the conduct of the Government, again and again, by the free suffrages of the country, and yet they were assailed with every slander and detained from half the presses of the towns by the republican partisans of France, who were also suffered and encouraged by spokesmen against them in every domestic policy.

"It intensified their resentment and seemed to them a most sinister sign of peril to the country and its Government that a great many men who were their bitterest enemies and who used the public prints most scandalously and unscrupulously against them were foreigners, Frenchmen and Englishmen who were not even citizens, but mere adventurers, the irresponsible agents of a reckless and almost revolutionary agitation which might jeopard the very existence of the young Government, but ten years established, over which they had been bidden to preside."

Origin of Alien Laws.

It was the dissension engendered by foreigners which caused the passage of laws against enemy aliens, of sedition acts and other statutes, which, drastic as they were, were approved by Washington, who, although then not in office, was deeply interested in the reign of order and the preservation of the young republic.

Events which occurred after his death (1799) did much to remove the foreign influences and to forestall further embarrassing entanglements. The purchase of Louisiana in 1803 from France, which had acquired it through Napoleon by private treaty with Spain three years previously, removed one source of friction. The final settlement of our relations with England which followed the war of 1812, the promulgation of the Monroe Doctrine, the extension of territory by purchase and cessions in various directions placed the United States, as far as her position on this continent is concerned, in a position aloof from the policies of Europe.

The Coal Juggernaut

IT was an upper West Sider speaking. He said:

"Near where I live there is an avenue along which pass daily many coal wagons. In this part of the avenue there is a steep grade which all these wagons have to climb. Those horse drawn are helped by towing teams; the motor propelled wagons make the grade alone and they make it surely and easily.

"Coal juggernauts you might call them, because they roll right on through and over everything; you might call them tanks if you wanted to. They come up this hill slowly, of course, but the point is that they keep moving; they are irresistible. The driver sitting in his cab up in front seems to be always quite calm; he knows the power he's got under him; he knows he can make the riffle.

"To be sure the string of trucks passing this way can't begin to supply all New York, but to see those giant automobile coal wagons climb that hill has been something encouraging to look at all winter long."